

POSTCRIPTS

by Jack Post

In 1776 the Town of Duxbury on May 23 voted to put its faith in its elected representatives, then assembled in Philadelphia, declaring "We leave the affair relating to independency to the Continental Congress, to stand or fall with them." The affairs of that momentous week in early July justified their confidence, and on the fourth the colonies were declared no longer subservient to Britain, but independent states, and in every town "Liberty or Death" banners flew from the liberty poles, in celebration of that first glorious fourth.

After the raising of the siege of Boston in April, everyone had pitched in to build a fort at the Gurnet to protect Plymouth, Kingston and Duxbury against the threat of British Admiral Graves who vowed that he would

blow the towns of these rebellious peoples around their ears.

Soon completed, the Gurnet fort that summer mounted 3 12-pounders, 2 9-pounders, and a 6-pounder, and was manned by a standing garrison of about 60 men, nearly half from Duxbury, a formidable enough array behind their commanding earthworks to deter enemy ships from attempting the narrow and turbulent passage into the bay. In addition, the garrison was supplemented by watches, with a beacon ready for immediate firing on Saquish, which were backed up by others on Captain's Hill in Duxbury on Monk's Hill in Kingston, and on the ridge at Plymouth. Thus within a matter of minutes, the alarm could be spread, and the militia called in from the fields to defend the towns.

One evening early in the spring, a flotilla was discovered approaching Saquish in the darkness. Immediately the tar barrels of the beacons were fired, and the

militiamen began to pour in from the neighboring towns to assemble under arms at Captain's Hill. But the flotilla turned out to be under the command of the American Captain Manly, bringing in a number of prizes of war seized from the British, so the crisis passed and the troops were dispersed.

By the time of the first anniversary of the glorious fourth, Duxbury militiamen had become regular Army troops and had served with Washington in the New York campaign. The war had lost its glamor, and although the women organized themselves into 2 companies of laborers to sow and harvest the crops, the absence of their men made life difficult in the extreme, more especially when in the summer of 1777 the remaining militiamen were called to a tour of duty against the British in Rhode Island. Considerable discontent was expressed by a delegation which had traveled to visit General Washington, the Commander in Chief, to ask if the term of enlistment might be held to one year; but the General, threatening to resign if his army were to last but one year, soon persuaded Mr. Partridge and the Massachusetts delegation to agree to a 3-year enlistment term.

Meanwhile, the only active encounter for the fort at the Gurnet occurred when the British frigate *Niger*, on patrol in Massachusetts Bay, briefly grounded on Brown's Bank while exchanging shots with the shore batteries. She floated free on the rising tide, and the engagement ended with no damage to either side, except a hole from a cannonball through the masonry of Gurnet Light.

The fort once again saw action in the War of 1812 at a time when the British navy was blockading the Massachusetts coast. The war, although extremely unpopular with Massachusetts leadership, still constituted a menace; so the fort at the Gurnet was reactivated, and lesser batteries

established along the shoreline of the inner bay. Only one incident occurred during the period of hostilities, when the fort fired at extreme range at 2 barges from the blockading British ships which were pursuing a small American boat loaded with flour and bound for Boston. The shot hit and sank one of the British barges, driving off the other, a small victory that was utterly unable to counteract the effectiveness of the English blockade.

The remains of the fort at the Gurnet are hardly visible today, but the memory of the past lives on in the annual Fourth of July celebrations even though they seem to relate only in name to the difficult early years of our country and to the memory of those who fought for the freedom that is now ours.